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Work together

The keys to a successful team

Question:

I saw your column on teams in the May 29 issue of Biz Times. While I appreciated what you wrote, my experience with teams hasn't been very positive. To be perfectly honest, I don't like teams. In college I hated classes when we had to do group projects. My group was always the one where a couple of people did nothing and still got the same grade I did. Unfair! At work, it's been more of the same. On projects, I carry some of the others while they loaf. No one calls them out. Very unfair! You say that teams are a good way to get the job done. I think that's only true when you have capable people who are committed to doing good work. I've never been part of a team like this. What do you say about this?

Answer:

Hold on! Before you thoroughly dismiss all teams, let me point out a couple of things. First, might your experience be biasing your perspective just a tad? Maybe you've just been unfortunate to find yourself in ineffective rather than effective teams.

Second, take a look at your last comment. You offer a pretty good definition of an effective team right there.

By the way, you might want to re-read my column. I did not say that an effective team "just happens" or that teaming is easy. No, I offered the contrary perspective. Effective teaming occurs when individuals act with intention and purpose to synthesize and integrate their efforts. In simple terms, your experience is more consistent with working in a "group" as opposed to a true team.

Before I get too far, let me be clear on something. Your experience notwithstanding, at this point, the evidence is clear:

"In the final analysis, teams need not be disorganized groups, wandering aimlessly, competing for resources and recognition."

Effective teams facilitate organizational effectiveness. Case studies abound at companies that have used teams to increase performance, including Motorola, 3M, and Kodak. Further, researchers like Richard Hackman, Edgar Schein, and William Dyer have documented that, when well constructed, teams can move the organization to a higher level of functioning.

So, if the goal is to become a high performance organization, then a sub-goal must be to build and deploy high performance teams. For this to happen, high performance leaders must lead the teams with an emphasis on linking and aligning individual and collective performance.

Leaders can do this by effectively at-

tending to the "three Ps" of the internal business environment (i.e., purpose, partnership, and process). Chartering and goal-setting ensure that matters of purpose are considered. Norming, communicating, and offering feedback ensure that issues of partnership are taken care of. Finally, by defining and documenting efficient and effective methods and procedures, process elements can be targeted and pursued. Partnership, the second "P," is at the heart of this reader's comments. He or she

has a skeptical view of teams because he or she has been repeatedly let down by the people elements of class project and workplace teams. Based on my consulting experience, I've come to conclude that partnership is the most critical variable underlying successful teams.

Let's face it, the people variable is never easy, simple or cut-and-dried. Building effective one-on-one relationships is tough enough. Multiply that complexity by the number of employees in a work team and the challenge can be intimidating.

At the same time, there are some brutal realities that must be confronted. Teams cannot exist without people. People, therefore, are at the core of any team.

Partnership, as a result, is the glue that binds the team together.

Think about it. People (do or don't) support the team's purpose. People (do or don't) partner with one another. People (do or don't) effectively carry out processes.

With regard to partnership and team relations, the following items have been documented as 12 keys:

1. Clear purpose.

The vision, mission, goal or task of the team has been defined and is accepted by everyone. There is a plan.

2. Informality.

The climate tends to be informal, comfortable, and relaxed. There are no obvious tensions or signs of boredom.

3. Participation.

There is a lot of discussion and everyone is encouraged to participate.

4. Listening.

The members use effective listening techniques such as questioning, paraphrasing and summarizing to get out ideas.

5. Civilized disagreement.

There is a disagreement, but the team is comfortable with this and shows no signs of avoiding, smoothing over or suppressing conflict.

6. Consensus decisions.

The team strives for decisions that all team members can live with through open discussion of everyone's ideas and avoidance of formal voting or easy compromises.

7. Open communication.

Team members feel free to express their feelings on the task as well as the group's operation. There are few hidden agendas. Communication takes place outside of meetings.

8. Clear roles and work assignments.

There are clear expectations about the roles played by each team member. When action is taken, clear assignments are made, accepted and carried out. Work is fairly distributed among team members.

9. Shared leadership.

While the team has a formal leader, leadership functions shift from time to time depending upon the circumstances, the needs of the group and the skills of the members. The formal leader models the appropriate behavior and helps establish positive norms.

10. External relations.

The team spends time developing key outside relationships, mobilizing resources and building credibility with important stakeholders in other parts of the organization.

11. Style diversity.

The team has a broad spectrum of team member types including members who emphasize attention to the immediate task, members who establish long-term goals, members who focus on position interpersonal relationships and members that raise questions

about how the team is functioning.

12. Self-assessment.

Periodically, the team stops to examine how well it is functioning and what may be interfering with its effectiveness.

How did your team rate on these 12 factors? To get your teammates thinking in the same direction, you might want to use this list as a discussion catalyst at your next team meeting.

Ultimately, teams sometimes need help to mesh and come together. Not all leaders are equally skillful in facilitating team development. The advice here is to equip teams with guidance and assistance from internal mentors and/or external consultants who know how to improve team performance (not just individual performance).

In the final analysis, teams need not be disorganized groups, wandering aimlessly, competing for resources and recognition. To avoid these unpleasant scenarios I suggest heeding the 12 principles outlined above. I suggest making sure the team has a coach to guide it.

I suggest getting real and start acting like a team rather than pretending to be one.

The stakes are too high to play games or tolerate people who do. ■

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